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GUIDE TO T. S. ELIOT LOVE SONG OF J.A. PRUFROCK

By

Prof. Bashir Hussain M.A.

KITAB MAHAL
Urdu Bazar, LAHORE
(W. PAKISTAN)

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INTRODUCTION

T. S. ELIOT

A Short Biographical Note

The death of Thomas Stearns Eliot on January 4, 1965, at the age of seventy-six, marked the end of a brilliant phase in English literary history—a phase of which he was the architect and the pathfinder. With all great men of letters, so also with Eliot, the appeal of his genius was not limited to the English-speaking peoples or to the European tradition. Although a poet of the English language, Eliot was, first and foremost, a European poet. And this is what precisely distinguished him from many of his English-language contemporaries; he belonged to a tradition broader than that of his language. Thus one can look upon Eliot as an English poet, a European poet and a universal poet. Eliot is universal in the sense in which all great poetry, from the funeral chants of the pigmies to the Hai-ku of the Japanese, is the common heritage of all men; and he is universal also because of his influence in world literature of our time, comparable to that of Klee in painting or that of Stravinsky in music: an influence which differs from others because it is a critical influence. Here was an artist who from the beginning gradually and constantly strove to enact a universal order of the world of imagination where both life and art had significance in an organic whole.

Life. Born September 26. 1888 to Henry Ward Eliot and Charlotte Chauncy Eliot, in St. Louis, Missouri. Educated in St. Louis schools, at Milton Academy and at Harvard: B. A. 1909; M. A. 1910; further graduate study at the

Sorbonne (1911), Harvard (1911-14), Merton College, Oxford (1914-15), Married first (1915) Vivienne Haigh (died 1947) second (1957) Esme Valerie Fletcher. Taught at Highgate School in London, worked in Lloyd's Bank, founded The Criterion (1922), entered The publishing house of Faber and Faber of which he was the director till his death. Became a British subject in 1927. Received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1948.

Chief Writings. Verse: 'Prufrock and other Observations' (1917); 'Ara Vos Prec' (1920); 'The Waste Land' (1922); 'Collected Poems' (1909-35); (1936); 'Four Quarters' (1944): 'Complete Poems and Plays' (1948).

Verse Plays. 'The Rock' (1934); 'Murder in the Cathedral' (1935): 'The Family Reunion' (1939); 'The Confidential Clerk' (1954). 'The Elder Statesman' (1959).

Criticism. 'The Sacred Wood' (1920); 'Selected Essays' (1932); 'The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism' (1933); 'Elizabethan Essays' (1934); 'Essays Ancient and Modern' (1936); Poetry and Drama' (1951); 'The Three Voices of Poetry' (1954): 'On Poetry and Poets' (1957).

General. 'The Idea of a Christian Society' (1939); 'Notes Towards the Definition of Culture' (1949).

THE LOVE SONG
OF
J. ALFRED PRUFROCK

By

T. S. Eliot

Critical Estimate. The impact of T.S. Eliot on the contemporary scene has been wide and profound. In one of his critical works he proclaimed himself as a Royalist in politics, an Anglo-Catholic in religion and a Traditionalist in literature. This is rather a vague generalization, and does not tell us anything about him. He began his poetical career by rejecting the romantic tradition in poetry, which stressed inspiration as the all-important element in poetic creation to the exclusion of any critical play of intelligence. By the end of the 19th century, poetry in England, following mainly the cult of romantic sensibility, had become nerveless and jejune and devoid of any profound significance. A poet of Eliot's originality found this tradition dead and unhelpful. Casting about for forms in which to pour out his experiences, he turned farther back to the Metaphysical poets of the 17th century. The important thing that he discovered in them was the use of the colloquial idiom and ironical contrasts. Another influence fused with that of the Metaphysical poets to determine the mode of his earlier poetry of which "The Love-Song of Alfred Prufrock" is a good specimen. This was the French Symbolist influence. Discussing it Dr. F. R. Leavis says: "The self-ironical, self-distrustful attitudes of Prufrock owe their definition largely to Laforgue (a French poet), and there the technical debt shows itself; it shows itself in the ironical transitions, and also in the handling of the verse".

Themes of his Early Poetry. His early poetry treats of the boredom and emptiness of polite society in Boston and London. The world that he presents is the world of

frustrated society ladies and diffident Prufrocks whose lives constitute a dull round of social trivialities.

"I have measured out my life with coffee spoons"

This line from "The Love-Song of Alfred Prufrock" is a subtle comment on the futile social preoccupations of the so-called civilized people. The years after the first World War saw the disappearance of all the finer cultural values that had sustained the life of the people in Europe. There followed a period of disillusion and cynicism, frustration and boredom. T. S. Eliot could not avert his ken from the decay all around him, and represented it in his poetry. Thus he held "the mirror up to Nature" and showed "the very age and body of time his form and pressure" "Prufrock", "Portrait of Lady", "Gerontion" and many other poems of this period reflect the chaotic state of modern civilization.

His Technique. To present the plight of modern society he evolved a technique—the technique of ironic implication. Eliot combines the passionate with the trivial, the heroic with the low in a way that helps him to state as well as judge. The poet is not called upon to make any comments in his own person. The ironic juxtaposition of the ridiculous with the splendid makes the best comment on a situation. To illustrate it, take the following lines from Prufrock :

Time for you and time for me,
And time yet for a hundred indecisions,
And for a hundred visions and revisions,
Before the taking of a toast and tea.

Here is the juxtaposition of the great visions and decisions (that may be postponed) with the immediate business of the moment, "toast and tea". By this device the character of the man, in all his perplexity and diffidence, comes to life and is given an ironical twist. This method of ironic juxtaposition of the sublime and ridiculous is used in "Gerontion" and "The Waste Land" with greater mastery and richer effects.

Another device to be noted here is the sly literary allusion that enables the poet to achieve unsentimental precision in his portrayal of a character.

> No ! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be ;
> Am an attendant lord...........

The Waste Land

Thus his early poems foreshadow the technique that Eliot perfected in later poems. It is, however, in "The Waste Land", that we find the sordidness and disillusion of the present age. The poem is divided into five sections : The Burial of the Dead; A Game of Chess ; The Fire Sermon ; Death by Water ; and What the Thunder Said. The first section—The Burial of the Dead—presents a picture of the modern city with its horror of death-in-life and of the pain that must accompany the re-birth of a new life. The second section—A Game of Chess—underlines theme stated in the first section. T. S. Eliot stresses the deadness of wealth and poverty in the Waste Land. The third section—The Fire Sermon—contrasts the present vulgarity of the city with its vanished splendour. In this section Eliot throws a hint of a possible redemption by invoking the words of St. Augustine and Buddha. The very short fourth section—Death by Water—reminds us that the water that is the source of life also brings death. In the last section—What the Thunder Said—Christian symbols are fused with Arthurian to mark the end of the waste time and the beginning of a new life after sacrificial death. The poem ends with the words : Shantih, Shantih, Shantih.

This brief analysis of the poem does no justice to its greatness. "The Waste Land'' employs the technique of ironic juxtaposition. The vulgarity and desolation of the modern age are contrasted with the glory and beauty of the past. In the third section T. S. Eliot describes a typical love-affair of the modern age, that of the typist which, in its dull physical surrender, shows the complete disintegration of our emotional life :

She turns and looks a moment in the glass,
Hardly aware of her departed lover;
Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass:
'Well now that's done; and I'm glad it's over'.

This is followed by a glimpse of the grand passion of Elizabeth and Leicester. Here the effect is unmistakable. The two scenes are simply juxtaposed, and allowed to convey the required effect. The technique is seen at work in a single line.

Literary echoes in this poem are abundant. Some readers find it difficult to feel the effect and point of literary allusions. The notes at the end of the poem make heavy demands upon the reader who is advised to read Miss Weston's "From Ritual to Romance" and Sir James Frazer's "The Golden Bough", two anthropological works, to understand the symbolism of the poem. Yet it remains a great poem, even if the references are missed. As Dr. F.R. Leavis says: "The allusions, references and quotations usually carry their own power with them as well as being justified in the appeal they make to special knowledge". Thus Eliot has achieved a compression otherwise not easily attainable.

Later Poems

"The Hollow Men" and Ash Wednesday". "The Hollow Men" that immediately followed "The Waste Land" marks the dead end. The poet is now concerned with inner experience. It records the utter hopelessness and destitution of modern life which is unredeemed by any glimpse of beauty. The poem ends with broken fragments from the Lord's Prayer, showing thus the incapacity of the Hollow Men even to pray.

For Thine is
Life is
For Thine is the

"Ash Wednesday" moves towards recovery or life. It is the product of a positive religious impulse.

Teach us to care and not to care
Teach us to still still
Even among these rocks,
Our peace in His will.........

The Four Quartets. In this poem he achieves a new depth. "This work consists of a number of poems, complete in themselves, yet also forming a unity. Each single poem is divided into five movements, and each is also named after a place : Burnt Norton—an old house in Gloucestershire ; East Coker—the Somerset village from which Eliot's family originally came ; The Dry Salvages, named from three small islands off the coast of Cape Aun ; and Little Gidding, a village in Huntingdonshire, where, in the early seventeenth century, Nicholas Ferrar retired with his family to live a life of ordered devotion in his 'Protestant nunnery'.

This poem consists of a series of meditations on a variety of subjects : Time, the pattern of history, the nature of language and the difficulties of a poet. It explores inner experience from different angles.

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

In the words of Lionel Elvin the theme of the poem can be stated thus : how to find an order in the flux of things, how to discipline oneself to feel the Eternal through and beyond Time. "The first poem—Burnt Norton—indicates the main theme : that the mere process of time seems a ridiculous and sad waste unless one has a sense of moments of experience that seem "timeless" in their intensity and their value. If one has this, then past and future are alike present in the present, and the sense of time, with its tyranny over the spirit, seems to dissolve". This poem is "philosophic". In the second poem—East Coker—the treatment of the subject is personal and particular, not philosophic and general. "And the major theme develops : life should become not merely a memory of isolated intense moments

but "a lifetime burning in every moment". The key phrase is: "In my end is my beginning". One must have a sense of the eternal to be able to find a meaning in life. But the effort to experience the eternal is painful—and even to express this in poetry is painful, for

every attempt
Is a wholly new start, and a different kind
of failure
Because one has only learnt to get the
better of words,
For the thing one no longer has to say, or
the way in which
One is no longer disposed to say it......

In the third poem—The Dry Salvages—water is the symbol of birth. The first movement is built on the contrast between two metaphors: the river of life and the sea of life. "The river is within us". The river is an old metaphor for the life of man. "The sea is all about us". This is a symbol of perpetual flux. Life's meaning can be found in the union of the temporal with the eternal. Eliot introduces here the doctrine of disinterested action.

And do not think of the fruit of action
Fare Forward.

"The subject of Little Gidding—the fourth poem—in the literal sense is a visit to the Chapel there, on a winter's afternoon, in order to pray in a place made holy by the prayers of other men. More generally, the literal subject is all such purposeful action, which has purpose.

beyond the end you figured
And is retired in fulfilment.

In the moral sense the subject is charity, 'the very bond of peace and of all virtues, without which whosoever liveth is counted dead': the

expending
Of love beyond desire.

This bare summary indicates the scope of the poem. A critic says: "Like 'The Waste Land' the poem is not an argument: there is no logical progression of statements. What there is a movement of experience, with countless subtle and powerful inter-relationships between the different parts of the whole. The value of the poem, through which one feels its sincerity, its beauty and its power to move, is in the poetry itself: the use of words, the images, the rhythms".

Final Estimate of T. S. Eliot. Miss Helen Gardner sums up T.S. Eliot's pre-occupations as a poet thus: "Mr. Eliot has always been a poet of vision. His earlier poetry presented mainly what Wordsworth called a 'visionary dreariness'. He might indeed be accused in his early poetry. ..... of attaching himself to loathing as others do to loving... ..... But the experience which lies behind "The Hollow Men" and "Ash Wednesday" compelled him to contemplate another vision: 'the visionary gleam, the glory and the dream', whose felt absence was his earlier subject. A deepening sense of the horror of life, something more terrible than dreariness, makes urgent the question; not why are we desolate, but why were we happy, or why did we ever expect happiness ? Our wretchedness is not an allusion; was our joy, however transitory, perhaps equally real ? After "The Waste Land" Mr. Eliot's poetry becomes the attempt to find meaning in the whole of his experience, to include all that he has known. To do this, he enters into himself, finding within himself his own music and his own language.

English poetry is particularly rich in visionary poets; Langland, Vaughan, Treherne, Smart, Blake, Wordsworth. But these are not the poets we think of when we think of Mr. Eliot. Although he shares with them the power to render 'unknown modes of being', he differs from them in his attitude to the poet's task. His unique distinction among English poets is the balance he has maintained between the claims of his vision and the claims of his art. In his poetry he is neither a prophet nor a visionary primarily, but a poet, a great 'maker'. When we read "Four Quarters" we are left

finally not with the thought of 'the transitory Being who beheld this vision', nor with the thought of the vision itself, but with the poem, beautiful, satisfying, self-contained, self-organised, complete. His master in this is not an English poet, but the greatest of European poets of vision: Dante.

The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

Introduction.

This poem, published in 1917, is the first of Eliot's poems, and already contains the promise of high things to come. The subject and technique of his mature poems are foreshadowed here. And there are memorable lines in it. It is not for nothing that it is the most anthologised piece.

Theme.

The poem portrays the boredom and frustration of modern life through a character, Prufrock, who, always hesitating and wavering, finds it hard to express his love to his beloved. There is irony in the title of the poem. It is a love-song that will never be sung. Do what Prufrock might, he would not be able to bring his courage to the speaking point.

Analysis and Appreciation.

'Prufrock' begins with a highly selective piece of scene-setting, in which is established the character of the surroundings and incidentally of Prufrock.

> Let us go then, you and I,
> When the evening is spread out against the sky—
> Like a patient etherised upon a table.

This is a metaphysical conceit that sets the tone of the poem immediately. Prufrock and the evening are identical —the two are peaceful, with a suggestion of unhealthiness and absence of vitality. It can be seen that the outward scene does not exist for its own sake; it forms a set of symbols which correspond to emotional realities. The lines quoted above are followed by other details of the external

scene, which reinforce the impression of disease and helplessness. 'The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window panes', is a significant detail. The phrase 'one-night cheap hotels' suggests the homelessness of the human soul. There is also something common between Prufrock and "the streets that follow like a tedious argument". The streets will lead nowhere ; and similarly the reflections of Prufrock are tortuous and without end.

Having established the kinship of Prufrock with the scene of evening, T. S. Eliot goes on to dramatise the 'tragical-comical' situation of the man. Prufrock is the picture of a man who is too fastidious to trust his instincts, who hesitates but is no great tragic figure like Hamlet (merely an attendant lord or so, at whom the eternal Footman snickers) and who does not risk the emotional upheaval of love. Prufrock is undecided and vaguely troubled.

> And indeed there will be time.
> For the yellow smoke that slides along the street ;
> Rubbing its back upon the window-panes ;
>
> ....
>
> ....
>
> Time for you and time for me,
> And time yet for a hundred indecisions,
> And for a hundred visions and revisions,
> Before the taking of a toast and tea.

Here by the use of the trivial for a serious purpose, Eliot throws into relief the character of the man The juxtaposition of the great visions and decisions with the immediate business of the moment, "toast and tea", is a fine ironic comment on the whole situation. To declare his love appears to Prufrock as something that might 'disturb the universe'.

> Do I dare
> Disturb the universe ?
> In a minute there is time
> For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.

Prufrock, therefore, unable to take a decision and execute it with firmness, withdraws into the world of despairing introspective day-dream. His mingled self-pity and self-disgust are brought home to us through the images of tortuous streets and the fog-cat, the pictures of his life as measured out with coffee spoons, and the symbols of his terror of social and sexual failure. Prufrock is not fitted for the role of a great tragic hero :

> No ! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be ;
> Am an attendant lord.........

His life is caught in trivial social routine :

> I have measured out my life with coffee spoons

Being incapable of any higher experience, he wishes to escape into the world of animal existence—

> I should have been a pair of ragged claws
> Scuttling across the floors of silent seas

He knows the arms "braceleted and white and bare," arms that "lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl", of the woman to whom he would say something of love : but how should he begin ?

> Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets
> And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes
> Of lonely men in shirt sleeves, leaning out of windows ?

Self-pity here is unmistakable. But this kind of appeal to the lady will not do. The 'over-whelming question' is never precisely formulated and uttered.

Prufrock never reaches a decision, never penetrates beyond 'the cups, the marmalade, the tea', to a conclusion either with the ladies in the poem or with his surroundings.

"It is impossible to say just what I mean!" This is his tragedy—a tragedy that is at once comic. The poem ends with a repetition of the desire to escape from the

complexities and troubles of human associations into 'the chambers of the sea'. He hears the mermaids singing and has a vision of them.

> riding seaward on the waves
> Combing the white hair of the waves blown back
> When the wind blows the water white and black.

This remarkable picture stands in sharp contrast to the inert Prufrock. Here are the mermaids and living creatures delighting spontaneously, without inhibition, in their natural environment and sharing its vital energies. And this is something that Prufrock will not get. He can merely retreat into a day dream :

> We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
> By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
> Till human voices wake us, and we drown.

Significance of the Poems.

The poem is not merely about a particular person. It has general significance and grows into a picture of the age which is marked by "a common impoverishment of vitality, a common lack of meaning". Miss Elizabeth Drew writes : "These people either live by the 'formulated phrases' of social and religious faiths which are unreal and devitalized, dry and sapless as a 'twisted branch upon the beach ;' or their lives are purely materialistic ; or they are conscious to a lesser or greater degree of their isolation and rootlessness, their insecurity and sterility. The 'lonely men in shirt sleeves leaning out of windows', 'the aimless smiles of the passersby' are all expressions or the negative helplessness enveloping this world. Those more conscious or more sensitive are the victims of a more positive torment. They agonize, like Mr. Prufrock, over their own vacillations, timidities and frustrations ; or lie sleepless, with souls 'stretched tight across the sky.........'

Some Qualities of the poem.

It is apparent from the analysis of the poem that T.S. Eliot is acutely aware of the plight of modern civilization. The horror and boredom of it have produced in him an attitude of disgust. He creates the moods of ironic and cynical repulsion, of unromantic disillusionment and of nervous intensity which mirror his predicament. "He can transmute its welter of triviality and horror into a wealth of related symbolic details", says Miss Elizabeth Drew. We can consider now this "wealth of related symbolic details." The images of the tortuous streets and the foggy evening and the pictures of his life as measured out with coffee house combine to present Prufrock's world of despairing introspection. The comparison of the evening to a 'patient etherised upon a table' establishes the tone and setting of the poem. And the next image is equally significant :

> Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
> The muttering retreats
> Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels ...
> Streets that follow like a tedious argument
> Of insidious intent
> To lead you to an over-whelming question......

This is followed by the description of the fog in terms of the movement of a cat. These details are symbolic ; they correspond to certain emotional realities, "The voices dying with a dying fall", "the eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase", and other details fix the picture of Prufrock. This imagery, drawn from the contemporary world, is not merely decorative ; it is an integral part of the poem and helps Eliot to present the peculiar situation in which Prufrock finds himself.

Another thing to notice is the method of presentation. It may be called the method of ironic juxtaposition.

T. S. Eliot learnt it from the Metaphysical poets, and used it consistently in his poems. He juxtaposes the passionate and the trivial, the grand and the low, in this way he can state and judge a situation at the same time. The advantage of this method is dramatic compression. The 'over-whelming question' which Prufrock dare not ask becomes ridiculous in the context of 'the cups, the marmalade' the tea' and 'some talk of you and me'. Take the following lines :

> Do I dare
> Disturb the universe ?
> In a minute there is time
> For decisions and revision which a minute will reverse.

Prufrock thinks that his 'over-whelming question' might release unforeseen consequences and, by its importance, disturb the universe. But the next two lines tell us that it is nothing very important. Prufrock is so different and wavering that his 'decisions' can be reversed in a minute. Finally, the shrunken world of Prufrock is set beside a series of suggestions which take us to a world of spontaneous action.

> I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each
> I do not think they will sing to me,
> I have been them riding seaward on the waves
> Combing the white hair of the waves blown back
> When the wind blows the water white and black.

The merits of the poem are unmistakable. He has produced effects charged with suggestion, in the fewest lines possible. To quote Babette Dentch : "He compresses, he selects, he intimates, and thus he creates an atmosphere, records a mood, in verse so charged with elliptical associations as to be a kind of musical shorthand".

NOTES

T.S. Eliot is fond of prefacing his poems with epigraphs taken from other poets. In each case the epigraph is designed to form an integral part of the effect of the poem. The epigraph to "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" comes from Dante's poem "The Divine Comedy". The meaning is :

"If I thought my answer to one who ever could return to the world, this flame should shake no more ; but since, if what I hear to be true, none ever did return alive this depth, without fear of infamy I answer thee".

In other words, Prufrock ventures to give utterance to the debate within himself only because he knows that no one will overhear him.

Title of the poem.

"The point of calling this poem a 'Love Song' lies in the irony that it will never be sung ; that Prufrock will never dare to voice what he feels". (F.O. Matthiessen).

The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherised upon a table;
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:
Streets that follow like a tedious argument
Of insidious intent
To lead you to an overwhelming question...
Oh, do not ask, 'What is it?'
Let us go and make our visit.

In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo.

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the windowpanes,
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-
panes

Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,
Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,
Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,
And seeing that it was a soft October night,
Curled once about the house, and fell asleep.

And indeed there will be time
For the yellow smoke that slides along the street
Rubbing its back upon the window-panes;
There will be time, there will be time
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;
There will be time to murder and create,

And time for all the works and days of hands
That lift and drop a question on your plate;
Time for you and time for me,
And time yet for a hundred indecisions,
And for a hundred visions and revisions,
Before the taking of a toast and tea.

In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo.

And indeed there will be time
To wonder, 'Do I dare?' and, 'Do I dare?'
Time to turn back and descend the stair,
With a bald spot in the middle of my hair—
[They will say: 'How his hair is growing thin!']
My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin,
My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin—
[They will say: 'But how his arms and legs are thin!']
Do I dare
Disturb the universe?
In a minute there is time
For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.

For I have known them all already, known them all—
Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,
I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;
I know the voices dying with a dying fall
Beneath the music from a farther room.
So how should I presume?

And I have known the eyes already, known them all—
The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,
And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,
Then how should I begin
To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?
And how should I presume?

And I have known the arms already, known them all—
Arms that are braceleted and white and bare
[But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair !]
Is it perfume from a dress
That makes me so digress ?
Arms that lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl.
And should I then presume ?
And how should I begin ?

. . . . .

Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets
And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes
Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows ?...
I should have been a pair of ragged claws
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.

. . . . .

And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully !
Smoothed by long fingers,
Asleep...tired...or it malingers,
Stretched on the floor, here beside you and me.
Should I, after tea and cakes and ices,
Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis ?
But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed,
Though I have seen my head [grown slightly bald]
brought in upon a platter,
I am no prophet—and here's no great matter ;
I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,
And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and
snicker,
And in short, I was afraid.

And would it have been worth it, after all,
After the cups, the marmalade, the tea,
Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me,
Would it have been worth while,
To have bitten off the matter with a smile,

To have squeezed the universe into a ball
To roll it toward some overwhelming question,
To say: 'I am Lazarus, come from the dead,
Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all'—
If one, setting a pillow by her head,
    Should say: 'That is not what I meant at all.
    This is not it, at all'.
    And would it have been worth it, after all,
Would it have been worth while,
After the sunsets and the dooryards and the sprinkled streets,
After the novels, after the teacups, after the skirts that trail along the floor—
And this, and so much more?—
It is impossible to say just what I mean!
But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen:
Would it have been worth while
If one, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl,
And turning toward the window, should say:
    'That is not it at all,
    That is not what I meant, at all'.

. . . . .

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;
Am an attendant lord, one that will do
To swell a progress, start a scene or two,
Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,
Deferential, glad to be of use,
Politic, cautious, and meticulous;
Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—
Almost, at times, the Fool.

    I grow old ..I grow old...
I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.

Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?
I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.

I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

I do not think that they will sing to me.

I have seen them riding seaward on the waves
Combing the white hair of the waves blown back
When the wind blows the water white and black.

We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
Till human voices wake us, and we drown.

EXPLANATIONS

Lines 1-3. These lines contain a metaphysical conceit. A good deal is packed into these lines. The poet suggests that there is a kinship between Prufrock and the evening. Both are peaceful, but with an undertone of disease and unhealthiness. The evening is compared to a patient ethenised upon a table. The image is modern, but a bit forced. An artificial connexion is established between the evening and the patient. Moreover, the lines set the scene. The lines are not merely a piece of decorative description; they correspond to the emotional unhealthiness of Prufrock.

Line 4. half-deserted streets. Prufrock has not the courage to face the people. So he chooses half-deserted streets.

Line 6. The line brings out vividly the restlessness of modern men, who prefer one-night cheap hotels to sweet home and all that it means.

Line 7. Oyster-shell Oyster is a kind of shelfish, usually eaten uncooked, whose shell sometimes contains a pearl.

Sawdust—tiny bits of wood falling off when wood is sawn.

This line brings out the cheapness of the restaurant to which Prufrock wishes to go. Oyster-shells are scattered all over the place.

Lines 8—10. Here the material streets are compared to abstract 'arguments' which lead to an overwhelming question. The winding streets suggest the confused and tedious working of the mind of Prufrock who is overwhelmed by the question of love. He is too wavering and diffident to voice the question, and he brushes it aside by saying

> Oh, do not ask, 'what is it ?'
> Let us go and make our visit.

Lines 13—14. The lines bring out the superficial nature of art discussions that women carry on in their shrill voices. Prufrock naturally is repelled by such art-chatter. Yet he himself is incapable of any depth of feeling.

Lines 15—22. The yellow fog.........and fell asleep. In these lines fog is described in terms of the movement of a cat. The foggy evening is a fit background to the situation in which Prufrock finds himself. This description reinforces the earlier comparison of evening to 'a patient'.

Lines 26—27. There will be a time......that you meet.

Prufrock is typical of modern men who assume artificial manners for different occasions. His vacillation is the undoing of Prufrock. He puts off every thing, hoping that a better time will come.

Lines 31—34. In these lines is brought out the wavering nature of Prufrock. He is not willing to face the present. Moreover, he has high visions of life, but these are such as are revised immediately. Hence they cannot sustain him. These lines show Eliot's method of presentation—the method of ironic juxtaposition. The trivial here is used for a serious purpose. The juxtaposition of the great visions and decisions with the immediate business of the moment 'toast and tea' is a fine ironic comment on the whole situation.

Lines 37—48. These lines show diffident Prufrock is. 'Indeed there will be time'—these words repeated quite a number of times in the poem throw light on the fluctuating character of Prufrock; he can only prevaricate and postpone firm decisions. "Do I dare disturb the universe.........". Another characteristic of Prufrock is that he is too self-conscious. He imagines that his action *i.e.* declaring his love—is fraught with great consequences.

Lines 49—51. For Prufrock such a situation is not the first of its kind. He has been through such frustrating

experiences before. In fact his whole life has been a round of trivial social preoccupations :

"I have measured out my life with coffee and spoons". His life has not been controlled by any high purpose. The social trivialities of modern life have always engaged his mind.

Lines 52—54. He knows his own voice dying gradually beneath the music from a father room. His resolution has always petered out. And the question always remains : "So how should I presume ? "

Lines 54—61. Prufrock remembers his past experiences which were as frustrating and disappointing as the present experience. The eyes of beautiful ladies have fixed him in a 'formulated phrase' *i.e.* he has formulated the exact phrase for his feeling, but he has had no courage to utter it. He has always been in a state of nervous tension, and he has never known how to begin his story. To spit out......days and ways. Butt-end-remnant. Prufrock cannot declare, with a sudden effort, what now remains of his life.

Lines 62—69. He recalls arms "braceleted and white and bare". This is a pleasant memory for him, and he hopes to draw courage from it.

Lines 70—72. He rehearses the manner of his declaration. It is as if Prufrock were to say that he had been through the streets of this sprawling city, at dusk when work is over and men want the comfort of home, working men rather different from those who talk of art-fashions in this drawing room, but part of our common humanity. He has seen them, not looking inwards where they are contented, but sitting at the windows, lonely, getting what comfort they can from their pipes. Should he explain that he has seen life like this, and feels the poorness and loneliness of it, and fears it for himself ? But Prufrock has not the courage even to say this.

Lines 73—75. I should have......silent seas. Prufrock cannot explain himself to the lady. He wishes he were not civilized, not even human, so that there would be no need to speak. He wishes he could have gone right back in the scale of evolution and taken what he wanted, ragged claws in front, going quickly and instinctively about his business, with no need to speak, back in the silent sea from which all life once came.

Line 77. malinger—to pretend, produce, or protract, illness in order to escape duty.

Lines 79—80. The question mark carries its own answer. Prufrock cannot force the moment to its crisis. He does not have the courage to declare his love. Moreover, he thinks it is no great matter. Thus he can again escape from the necessity of acting. He is an object of silent ridicule for the footman. The word eternal suggests that Prufrock's own situation will never change.

Lines 87—98. These lines are an expression of Prufrock's enervated indecision. He thinks that it would not be worth while to summon courage to put his question. But the question overwhelms him, and he cannot speak. The lines recall Marvell's—

> Let us roll all our strength and all
> Our sweetness up into one ball
> And tear our pleasures with rough strife,
> Thorough the iron gates of life.

The contrasted philosophy of Marvell brings into relief Prufrock's lack of vitality and courage. He never reaches a decision beyond 'the cups, the marmalade, the tea' to a conclusion either with the lady in the poem or with this surroundings. He is afraid that the lady might say that he had misunderstood her ordinary courtesy to him for deeper feeling.

Lazarus : Lazarus—a poor man. Reference is to Luke XVI. 20. Lazarus generally lay at the threshold of a rich man who threw him crums. After death, Lazarus went to heaven, and the rich man to hell. The rich man saw Lazarus in heaven, and requested him to go back to the world and tell his brothers that they should lead virtuous lives. But Abraham said : "They have Moses and the prophets ; let them hear them". And he-*i.e.* the rich man—said, "Nay, father Abraham, but if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent". And Abraham replied, "If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be pursuaded, though one rose from the dead".

Lines 111—119. Prufrock also feels that he is not cast for a tragic role. He is wavering and hesitating ; but that does not link him with Prince Hamlet. He is objective enough to realise that he is merely an attendant, lord, fastidious in dress and manner to the point of absurdity. He can start a scene or two, but he cannot carry it through. His self-disgust is brought home to us clearly.

In these and the preceding lines there are literary allusions to Lazarus and Hamlet. The point of these allusions is that T.S. Eliot sets beside the shrunken world of Prufrock's nature a series of suggestions which take us to worlds of action and expression which are very different. Lazarus and Shakespeare's Hamlet disturb his pitifully enclosed universe. Lazarus and Hamlet seem to mock his own impotence to 'force the moment to its crisis'.

Lines 124—131. The poem ends with a desire to escape to "the chambers of the sea" beyond the complexities and troubles that may be raised by human associations. He hears the mermaids singing and has a vision of them

> riding seaward on the wave
> ....

The mermaids live delightedly and spontaneously in their natural environment *i.e.* the sea ; they are carried

along with the seas's vital energies. Prufrock himself has yearned for such an instinctive life—a life of complete harmony with his environment. But he has been a misfit in his environment, and is too civilized to act spontaneously and without inhibitions. In these lines he withdraws into passive day-dream-."Chambers of the sea"—where he is caressed and crowned with seaweed, by sea-girls. Yet he is haunted by the fear of being startled out of his day-dream to live his living death again.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Q. Write a note on the characteristic themes of Modern Poetry and the vehicle used by the modern poets for the expression of ideas with reference to T.S. Eliot.

Ans. Before considering modern poetry itself a word may be said about the modern temper—that is about certain nonliterary influences shaping the poetry as well as the audience who received it and gave it its reputation.

First, this audience has been, to a probably unprecedented degree, interested in the mental phenomena revealed by introspection. The growing prestige of psychology itself as a subject of investigation has been paralleled in prose literature by the works of such writers as Joyce and Proust, each of whom created enormous verbal fabrics out of the development and history of a single sensibility.

Second, the modern temper—at least by contrast with the Victorian—has been characterized more by anxiety and insecurity than by confidence and assurance. In a physical sense, these qualities are no doubt attributable to the high frequency of social cataclysm during the twentieth century: the thirty-six year period 1914-49 included after all ten years of world war, and ten of world depression—not to mention the Russian, Italian and German revolutions, and

the Spanish Civil War. In a spiritual sense, the period induced insecurity by its wide-spread revolt against traditions of all kinds, a revolt which led to an uncertainty about standards in politics, morals, and other areas. Hence, probably, the large number of conversions and apostasies (political or religious) among modern intellectual leaders.

Third, the period has seen the spread of radical doubts about human freedom and human dignity. Determinism, in a philosophic or religious sense, is nothing new under the sun ; but by many followers of Marx (1818-83) and Freud (1856-1939), determinism in human affairs has been given in recent times, a seemingly scientific basis. Marxism has suggested that human societies, in their organization and historical development, are predetermined by economic or technological considerations ; Freudianism has suggested that human individuals are predetermined by the formation or malformation of the unconscious parts of their minds during infancy or early childhood. As for man's relation to his environment in a larger sense, the physical universe of science is becoming progressively larger, longer-lived and more incomprehensible to non-mathematicians. Finally, the anthropological approach to human life in general has suggested that many a cherished institution or belief takes its significance and use solely from the cultural framework in which it occurs, and has, outside that framework, neither meaning nor objective validity.

A Philosophic Problem. Modern poetry in general has the reputation of being esoteric and obscure ; but the human problem which is at the heart of much of the best of it is not at all hard to understand. Stated in its broadest general terms, this problem might be said to be the contrast or constant disparity felt by any intelligent, sensitive person today between experience measurable or describable in the terms of physical science and that immeasurable meaning—of whatever sort——which permeates experience in the form of value. For modern man, this problem is necessarily acute : we can split the atom—that is a physical, scientific matter ; but splitting it merely faces

us with the question of what to do about bomb—which is a political or social or moral or ethical or even metaphysical matter, and much less easy for us to handle. Yet both matters are tied up inseparably in the same atom—the scientifically graspable world on the one hand, and on the other hand the same world as it exists in terms of aesthetics or ethics or religion or psychology.

This contrast, this problem, is not of course peculiar to our age : but it comes before our age in a special form. Because of the success and increasing prestige of technology since the industrial revolution, and because scientific statements about experience customarily receive widespread acceptance while evaluative statements frequently meet with hot debate, there is a tendency today to regard the physical picture of the world as the *real* one, and any other picture as a comparatively illusory or a merely relative one. It is as though a critic were to say, comparing two oil paintings, "The question of which is a better picture than the other is a matter of opinion ; but the number of square inches occupied by each canvas is a matter of fact !" There are even schools of philosophy today which deny meaning itself to judgments of value, on the ground that only scientific statements are verifiable. Yet individuals and societies, no less today than in the past, are continually confronting choices which have to be made on the basis of some premise about value.

What modern poetry seeks to do with this contrast between the measurable and the immeasurable facts of experience is to dramatize it. Here the attitude of a typical modern poet is different from that of a romantic. The romantics tended to attempt individual solutions of the problem ; Wordsworth and Shelley had programmes ; Blake issued manifestoes. A great deal of modern poetry is more tentative, and has a different object in view. It seeks to understand the split in modern ways of looking at things ; to understand, to diagnose, to dramatize ; not necessarily to prescribe.

Thus John Crowe Ransom, in a poem whose method symbolizes much in modern poetry, presents the tension between two irreconcilable attitudes toward a situation: the metaphysical Honour, which separates his lovers, and the physical desire, which keeps them together. Choice of either excludes the other :

> In Heaven you have heard no marriage is,
> No white flesh tinder to your lecheries,
> Your male and female tissue sweetly shaped
> Sublimed away, and furious blood escaped.
> Great lovers lie in Hell, the stubborn ones
> Infatuate of the flesh upon the bones :
> Stuprate, they rend each other when they kiss,
> The pieces kiss again, no end to this.

At first the observer had been about to intervene, to resolve the "torture of equilibrium ;" the pair, too "strict," were "ruined," he felt. But having analysed the dilemma more fully, he steps back from it, content to watch the lovers, and the two incompatible decisions, "spinning, orbited nice," like twin stars "perilous and beautiful." The achievement of a perilous equilibrium sometimes at the expense of torture but always for the purpose of beauty, is the goal of some of the greatest modern poetry.

A different approach to the same basic philosophic problem is exploited in Auden's brief, satiric "Unknown Citizen". The poem dramatizes a disparity between the fullness of the physical statistical information presented concerning the Citizen and the crude inadequacy of the judgments made about him. Whereas in "The Equilibrists" the balance is strictly preserved between physical and metaphysical, in "The Unknown Citizen" one pan of the balance-scale has been swept seemingly empty for the purposes of irony. The Citizen

> . . . . had everything necessary to the Modern Man,
> A phonograph, a radio, a car and a frigidaire.

The metaphysical enters the poem solely in the words "saint" in the fourth line and "free" and "happy" in the next-to-last; and it enters only to be repudiated and brushed aside by the speaker. But by its very absence, by the urgent need for it which the poem makes us aware of equilibrium is created. Somehow the statistics will not do; the physical "facts" are incomplete.

The sense of incompleteness itself, the feeling of irrecoverable loss of existence without spiritual centre, compass or equilibrium has nowhere been dramatized more poignantly than in "The Hollow Men," one of the most widely and popularly known of T.S. Eliot's poems. Here, evocations of romantic love ("Lips that would kiss", religious affirmation (broken prayers), and aesthetic responsiveness ("sunlight on a broken column") delicately illuminate some twilight province of the mind like fading or dying stars. The imagined characters, it is clear, feel the psychical emotional vacuum connected with the merely physical nature of their surroundings:

> This is the dead land
> This is cactus land
> Here the stone images
> Are raised, here they receive
> The supplication of a dead man's hand
> Under the twinkle of a fading star...

and are aware of a better past ("our lost kingdoms"). But an inhibition has fixed them in their scarecrow-like condition:

> Between the conception
> And the creation
> Between the emotion
> And the response
> Falls the Shadow...

And has robbed even their own self-analysis of logical coherence:

Our dried voices, when
We whisper together
Are quiet and meaningless . . .

Hence the poem, by contrast with "The Equilibrists" or "The Unknown Citizen," dispenses with the more formal devices of expository prose ; there is little punctuation, and much grammatical fluidity (is "rose" in Part IV a noun or verb ?). At the same time the short lines and fairly marked rhythms give the effect of an intermittent chant, spoken to accompany the crepuscular ring around-the-rosy of Part V. All aspects of the poem—sound-effects, images, language, ideas—fuse prefectly to dramatize the experience of inadequacy, of incompleteness.

Incompleteness is one important charge which poetry today brings against an exclusively physical world-picture : two others are impermanence and incoherence.

Flux. The sense of decay and transience in physical experience is hardly a new theme for poetry ; indeed, it was extensively used by the romantics—by Shelley, for example :

When the lamp is shattered
The light in the dust lies dead—
When the cloud is scattered
The rainbow's glory is shed.

With the romantics, however, it commonly issued in a rich, self-gratifying melancholy—

No song but sad dirges
Like the wind through a ruined cell,
Or the mournful surges
That ring the dead seaman's knell—

This kind of response, though strong in personal feelnig, works against the detachment necessary to drama.

The modern poet is, ostensibly at least, more non-committal, more the stage-manager than the protagonist. Having established his triple comparison between the ancient Roman inhabitant of Britian, the decaying forest in autumn, and himself, Housman comes to a rapid and laconic conclusion :

> The gale, it plies the saplings double
> It blows so hard, 'twill soon be gone ;
> Today the Roman and his trouble
> Are ashes under Uricon.

Frost's "Oven Bird" and "Nothing Gold Can Stay," both variants on the same theme, pose a question of frame a paradox ("So dawn goes down to day") ; they do not define a particular emotional response by embracing it. Hopkins' "Spring and Fall", though on first reading it may seem pervaded by an almost Shelleyan mournfulness, is also built around a paradox. Margaret's approaching predictable sorrow, though she will then perfectly understand its nature, will not be explicable in words or philosophical formulae : "Nor mouth had, no nor mind, expressed". And even in "The Wild Swans at Coole," despite Yeats's brief lament or the passing of nineteen years, the focus is on the magnificent wans, symbols of something eternal, unfading, and impersonal.

Auden in his lyric "As I Walked Out One Evening" objectifies even more explicity, and with considerable humour, the tension between an asserted ideal and the mutabilities of physical experience. In his dialogue between the lover and the clocks, the lurid extravagance of the imagery results in a light, mockingly ironic tone. When the lover sings

> I'll love you till the occen
> Is folded and hung up to dry,
> And the seven stars go squawking
> Like geese about the sky—

the clocks are able to counter with an equally hyperbolic sketch of the vicissitudes of domesticity :

> The glacier knocks in the cupboard,
> The desert sighs in the bed,
> And the crack in the tea-cup opens
> A lane to the land of the dead.

A kindred theme is the subject of Stevens's "Peter Quince at the Clavier," in which the immortal beauty of the heroine bathing is set against the flickering lust she awakens in her senile spectators :

> Susanna's music touched the bawdy strings
> Of those white elders ; but, escaping,
> Left only Death's ironic scraping.

More elaborate and philosophical treatments of a similar theme occur in two of Yeats's most famous poems, "Sailing to Byzantium" and "Among Schoolchildren". In both these poems, the general question of the flux of the physical world is crystallized into the individual problem of old age—as the recurrent image of the scarecrow demonstrates : "a tattered coat upon a stick," "a comfortable kind of old scarecrow". In "Sailing to Byzantium" the decrepitude of age is contrasted with the energy of the ordinary world, ceaselessly preoccupied with the cyclical processes of birth, growth, reproduction and decay—

> The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,
> Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long
> Whatever is begotten, born, and dies...

This energy the speaker rejects in favour of an ideal symbolized by the centuries old, ecclesiastical, medieval classical Eastern empire of Byzantium—a timeless ideal compounded of philosophy ("unageing intellect"), religion ("sages standing in God's holy fire"), and especially art (the golden bird, set up a golden bough, "to keep a drowsy

Emperor awake''). That this goldsmith's art is a kind of symbol or surrogate for poetry—the art Yeats himself is practising in writing the poem—is suggested by the mention, in every stanza, of singing ; poetry, the poem might almost be saying, takes its materials from the flux of natural life—"what is past, or passing, or to come''—but is itself "out of nature'' in so far as it has a universal validity and is not subject to decay.

By comparison to the formality and austere splendour of the images used in "Sailing to Byzantium,'' "Among Schoolchildren'' sets forth in a natural, homely manner the question of what to make of a diminished thing—again, the decay of life in old age. The speaker, a public school inspector, is inspired by the sight of the children to lose himself in a reverie on his own youth and bygone passionate love, a reverie that widens to include the sad discrepancy between human concepts of the ideal ("Presences/That passion, piety, or affection knows''), and the mundane fruits of human enterprise ("a sixty-year-old smiling public man''). Once again the limitations of life are resolved by being balanced against the satisfactions of art ; but here art is seen in an aspect different from the Byzantine ideal. Now it is art as "play'', as spontaneous, unself regarding activity, unencumbered by the harassing comparison of what we should like to be with what we are. It is art as a harmonious union of all aspects of being ; art in which the participant so loses himself that none can "know the dancer from the dance''. In the combined figure of the tree and the dancer, the poem suggets that sensual existence is capable of form and significance by participation in a transcendent aesthetic reality.

It is worth noting that the two poems succeed, in so far as they do succeed, by being their own demonstrations : they do not, that is, prove their points by logical argument ; instead they create the experience that they are talking about. Thus in "Sailing to Byzantium'' the line

> Of hammered gold and gold enamelling

suggests both by its literal meaning and by its strict chiastic sound-pattern ("...am...gold gold...am...") the glittering finality of a great artifact; while in the next-to-last line of "Among Schoolchildren" the anapestic intrusion into the basic iambic beat gives an effect of spontaneous response on the part of the poem itself to the rhythms of the dance with which it is to conclude:

> O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
> How can we know the dancer from the dance ?

The Decay of Meaning. An experience which most poets of recent times—and not only poets—have probably undergone is doubt about the authenticity of values; they seem to have felt rational empiricism like acid eating away at any non-utilitarian concept of life's purposes—whether the concept stems from patriotism, morals, religion, or love. Yeats, for example, his faith undermined by Victorian popularizers of science whom he hated but believed, at first retreated into a hazy Celtic dream-world of forgotten folklore and hypnotic scenery (the Lake Isle of Innisfree) but later matured his visions of art and Ireland into a hardier armour with which to face his age. Other poets used the very experience of loss as a theme for poetry—the sense, perhaps mometarily exhilarating—of the bottom dropping out of things. Housman, translating from Horace the poem he is said to have considered the most beautiful ever written, asserted again, with stoic outward unconcern, the doctrine that ethics never ultimately count—

> When thou descendest once the shades among,
> The stern assize and equal judgment o'er,
> Not thy long lineage nor thy golden tongue
> No, nor thy righteousness, shall friend thee more.

Compare MacLeish's "End of the World", or Frost's "Acquainted with the Night" and "Desert Places". In "Acquainted with the Night," the darkness is presided over "at an unearthly height" by 'One luminary clock,'' a gadget

that divides the streams of experience into equal portions efficiently but unfortunately pointlessly : it

> Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right.

Similarly, in "Desert Places" the snow which blankets existence has "no expression, nothing to express" ; in Tate's commemorative Ode,

> The wind whirrs without recollections,

and at the conclusion of Eliot's "Gerontion" the snow's whiteness absorbs the white feathers of the wind driven gull.

Nature. The last few poems mentioned typify the passing of the romantic concept of nature. The many meanings which landscape suggested to a poet like Wordsworth—the plastic shaping Spirit rolling through hills and sunsets, the appropriate nurturer of man's nobler qualities, and so on—these have scarcely been carried over entire into the twentieth century. Nature is still used in poetry, and sometimes as a symbolic vehicle of human feeling, but not any longer as being in itself and by virtue of its very existence a clue to Ultimate Significance. Instead we have the detached, indifferent fauna of Frost :

> The woodchuck could say whether it's like his
> Long sleep, as I describe its coming on
> Or just some human sleep—

or the allegorical mountains of Auden :

> Wandering lost upon the mountains of our choice
> ....
> Upon the mountains of my fear I climb—

or Tate's ominous screech owl, spider, and serpent ; or the frigid constellation which greets, in Eliot, the members of the International Set after their demise and dissolution :

> De Bailhache, Fresca, Mrs. Cammel, whirled
> Beyond the circuit of the shuddering Bear
> In fractured atoms...

or, in Hopkins, oceanic horrors :

> ...the sea flint flake, back-backed in the regular blow
> Sitting Eastnortheast, in cursed quarter, the wind ;
> Wiry and white-fiery and whirlwind-swivelled snow
> Spins to the window-making unchilding unfathering
> deeps.

Hopkins, it is true, occasionally invests nature with something like the old romantic awe and wonder :

> There lives the dearest freshness deep down things—

but the freshness which Hopkins discerns does not spring from the observer of nature (as the Romantics sometimes implied that it did) or autonomously from nature itself. Instead it exists on account of an explicit supernature :

> Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
> World broods with warm breast and with ah!
> bright wings.

The placing of the word "bent" is interesting. One would expect, perhaps, to find "the Holy Ghost *bent over the world*" ; instead it is the *world* which is "bent" : literally, spherical" ; figuratively, "obsessed by its own concerns", or even "warped," "distorted," "imperfect".

History. The experience of loss of meaning in nature is paralleled in other modern poems, by the experience of loss of meaning in history. Is history an empty chain of exciting but random catastrophes ? In the nineteenth century the phrase "survival of the fittest" seemed to imply a comforting answer to this question ; today, many people are less sure. (How, after all, did Darwin know which species *were* the "fittest"? Simply by checking on which ones, in fact, survived. Why not, then use a more exact phrase : "the survival of the survivors"?) Though the doctrine of inevitable progress probably persists today as an unexamined assumption in the popular mind, for poetry it is no longer a source of strength.

All this is not to imply, of course, that romantic or Victorian poetry reflected any uncritical acceptance of the doctrine of universal progress ; the matter is far more complicated than that. Influenced by the French Revolution and by concomitant movement for reform (intellectual or social) in England, the romantic poets tended to become either Utopians, like Shelley in his "Prometheus", or cynics, like Byron in his "Don Juan'' Between these two extremists stood Wordsworth, disillusioned by the triumph of the extremists in France, yet still hoping for rational reform in England. In the less turbulent Victorian age, though many educated people became uncomfortable about the increasing mechanization and materialism of the day, the assumption that history was at least getting *somewhere* (whether you liked its destination or not) remained substantially unquestioned.

Yeats's sonnet "Leda and the Swan'' presents by symbols quite a different view of events. In Greek myth the rape of Leda by the Supreme Divinity disguised as a swan had been fraught with historic consequences : two of Leda's children were Helen, who started the war which demolished an empire ("The broken wall, the burning roof and tower''), and Clytemnestra, who treacherously murdered the leading captain among the victors ("Agamemnon dead''). The sonnet envisages this chain of events and its cause as essentially violent, physical, and brutal—though the question is left open as to whether history may not have a non-physical meaning after all ; and whether, if it does, that meaning is or is not comprehensible by the human participants :

> Did she put on his knowledge with his power
> Before the indifferent beak could let her drop ?

For a more abstract treatment of the theme, compare the paragraph in "Gerontion'' beginning

> After such knowledge-what forgiveness ? Think now
> History has many cunning passages...

Compare also Pound's bitter comment on World War I :

> There died a myriad,
> And of the best, among them,
> For an old bitch gone in the teeth,
> For a botched civilization.

Now history has two aspects, social and personal. Those who do not read the newspapers may perhaps for a time escape the import of the first; no one escape the second. One of Eliot's great strengths as a poet is his ability to handle both sides of history simultaneously; the passage referred to in "Gerontion", for example, applies equally to the cycle of Western culture and to Gerontion's sense of his own past. In "The Waste Land, Part III" mating of the clerk and typist is most notable for its machine-like quality (machines presumably do not know or care what takes place in respect to them)—

> She smoothes her hair with automatic hand
> And puts a record on the gramophone—

and the automatism is underscored by the presence of Tiresias, who, in Sophocles' famous play, witnessed a mating charged with the complex significance of sin and ultimate redemption.

In "The Waste Land, Part II" history is concretely dramatized not simply by the allusions to Cleopatra, Dido, and Ophelia (heroines whose stories were tragic because meaningful) but also by the room itself, full of physical reminders of the past. At first the room seems proud and magnificent; but as the poem approaches the lady whose day consists of hot water at ten, a closed car at four, and a game of chess, the four walls suddenly develop sinister, menacing qualities :

> And other withered stumps of time
> Were told upon the walls; staring forms
> Leaned out, leaning, hushing the room enclosed.

The stumps of time are "withered" because no one cares what they once meant; or because for those who do care their significance has come to be merely frivolous:

> OOOO that Shakespeherian Rag
> It's so elegant
> So intelligent...

Triviality is taking over, and the result is nightmare.

The sense of nightmare, after the meaning of experience has become attenuated or doubtful, is almost a staple of modern poetry. It invests the inanimate with unwelcome animation:

> Streets that follow like a tedious argument
> Of insidious intent...

It confounds the living and the dead:

> There I saw one I knew, and stopped him, crying: "Steston!
> "You who were with me in the ships at Mylae!
> "That corpse you planted last year in your garden,
> "Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?
> "Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?...

It conjures up monsters:

> A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
> A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
> Is moving its slow thighs...

It discloses internal abysses:

> O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall
> Frightful, sheer, no man-fathomed...

It predicts horrors:

> Where do they come from? Those whom we so much dread
> As on our dearest location falls the chill
> Of their crooked wing...

It is so familiar that it can even be kidded by a comic treatment :

> Death and the Raven drift above
> And Sweeney guards the horned gate.

T.S. Eliot is a convert to Anglo Catholicism, a publisher and former banker, an American-born British citizen, and a Londoner. Sensitive, highly educated, acutely aware of the European past as it impinges on the present, he probably has conveyed with greater success than any other modern poet the sense, of pointless physical flux in time coupled with decay of meaning and value. Take for example these lines from "Burnt Norton" :

> Only a flicker
> Over the strained time-ridden faces
> Distracted from distraction by distraction
> Filled with fancies and empty of meaning ..

Towards the end of the poem, by means of a play on the term "word" he dramatizes these processes in respect to both literature and religion :

> Words strain,
> Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
> Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
> Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
> Will not stay still. Shrieking voices
> Scolding, mocking, or merely chattering,
> Always assail them. The Word in the desert
> Is most attacked by voices of temptation...

The process for him is usually staged in an urban setting : "the gloomy hills of London......this twittering world".

To balance this realization of a kind of chaos, "Burnt Norton" offers two counterweights : the moment of transcendent insight and the implication of an orderly pattern somehow permeating experience. In this pattern, symbolized as a wheel, the moment of insight corresponds to the geometric centre of the hub—the point which theoretically

does not turn but which accounts for and controls the turning of all the rest. Thus the moment of insight is both inside and outside of time: "Only through time is time conquered". It corresponds in Eliot's thought to the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation, through which history receives meaning from an event both inside and outside history—as the "Word in the desert" passage would indicate.

The way in which "Burnt Norton" confronts a dramatized perception of modern emotional or spiritual inadequacy with a set of symbols rooted in the past but presented as vigorously relevant to the present is typical of much of Eliot's poetry. In "Prufrock" we have Prufrock himself and Hamlet (or Prufrock and the mermaids, or Prufrock and Lazarus, or Prufrock and John the Baptist, or Prufrock and Guido da Montefeltro). In "Gerontion" we have the speaker and Christ. "The Waste Land" we have Sweeney, Mr. Eugenides, and Thames maidens etc., set over against Percival, Ferdinand, and a host of others.

The Vehicle. So far we have been examining some of the characteristic themes of modern poetry in general; a further matter to be looked into is modern poems and how they are built. It seems to be the problem of every age of poetry to find out new ways of using language: a Donne rejects the profuse elaboration of a spenser; a Wordsworth or Keats repudiates the wit and conscision of a Pope. Three areas in which innovations will ordinarily be found whenever a revolution in poetry occurs are versification, diction and imagery.

1. Versification: From the time of Milton down through the nineteenth century the iamb (a light syllable followed by a heavy) has been the dominant rhythmic unit in English poetry—so much so that poets have seemed almost to take it for granted. In practice, the dominance of the iamb means that, normally, if a line has five beats, it will also have ten syllables; if four beats, eight; and so on. Flexibility is ordinarily attained by varying the number of beats in a given

line while holding the total number of syllables constant. Milton's line

> Rocks, caves, lakes, fens, bogs, dens and shades of death

has ten syllables, of which eight receive at least some stress; while Pope's

> And curses wit, and poetry and Pope

has ten syllables but only four stresses. Thus the tradition has been to establish a basic iambic pattern with a fixed number of syllables per line, and then to vary the accents within the framework.

This tradition by no means began with Milton. Nor did it end with Tennyson: Yeats and Frost, for example, are moderns in whose works it is preserved and continued. Hopkins, however, developed a system of his own which has had considerable influence since his time. Like his frequent and strongly marked alliteration, it derives partly from the older (fourteenth-century or earlier) English poetry, of which "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" is an example. Its most salient feature, exemplified very fully in "The Wreck of the Deutschland", is a reversal of the traditional roles of the stress-count and syllable-count of any line: the number of main accents is held fairly constant, but the total number of syllables is deliberately allowed to fluctuate within very wide limits. This can readily be illustrated by comparing the last line in stanza 11 with the last line in stanza 12:

> The sour scythe cringe, and the blear share come.
>
> ....
>
> Not vault them, the millions of rounds of thy mercy no reeve even them in?

Each line has six accents: in the first, every word except "and" and the two "the's" gets a beat; while in the second, there are no less than twelve unaccented syllables.

Influenced by the later blank verse of Shakespeare and other Elizabethan dramatists, Eliot has developed a rhythm which, in its frequent disregard of the iamb, has something in common with Hopkins. With the first of the two Hopkins lines quoted above, compare this line from "Gerontion" :

> Rocks, moss, stonecrop, iron, merds

In this poem, in "The Journey of the Magi", in parts of "The Waste Land", and elsewhere, Eliot is equally free with blank varse itself; that is, he occasionally asserts the traditional pattern, as in a line like

> She gives when our attention is distracted—

but frequently allows himself anywhere from two to seven or eight feet per line. Compare the versification of Auden's "Musee des Beaux Arts".

2. Diction : An important tendency in modern poetic diction has been the general effort on the part of most poets to make dramatic use of natural unself-conscious language drawn from ordinary modern speech. This is not wholly an innovation, since of course Byron and Browning practised it in the nineteenth century and Pope in the eighteenth; but such lines as Eliot's

> And the villages dirty and charging high prices,

or Auden's

> And fake with ease a leopard or a dove,

or Frost's

> What if it wasn't all it should be ? I'd
> Be satisfied if he'd be satisfied—

certainly run counter in their tone to the general romantic tradition :

> It little profits that an idle king,
> By this still hearth, among these barren crags,
> Matched with an aged wife...

A further contrast with the romantics lies in the variations of mood made possible by such diction. Romantic poetry (Byron, again, is an outstanding exception) customarily treats almost any subject with intense seriousness; modern poetry, with its increased use of drama, is fully capable of anticlimax, understatement, and other witty or ironic or mock-heroic devices. Auden's sonnet "Who's Who", for example, is mock-heroic in the most literal sense of that term. The opening lines of "Prufrock", in which the glow of the setting sun's last rays on the clouds is compared to the slight flush induced by ether in a patient undergoing an operation, have become famous or notorious. A romantic or Victorian elegist (Shelley or Tennyson, for example) would scarcely have spoken of the day on which the subject of his elegy died in such terms as Auden uses concerning Yeats's death :

> A few thousand will think of this day
> As one thinks of a day when one did something slightly unusual.

Nor would a romantic or Victorian—compare Tennyson's "Ulysses", have let a traveller who had gone far to witness the birth of Christ speak of the climax of his journey in language like this :

> .. and so we continued
> And arrived at evening, not a moment too soon
> Finding the place ; it was (you may say) satisfactory.

At their best, such sudden drops in tone are integrally related to the total meaning of the poems in which they occur. Prufrock compares the evening to an unconscious patient because he feels that his own powers of action are anesthetized by hesitation and self consciousness; the metaphor about the evening is an extension of his self-awareness into his surroundings. Auden's elegy on Yeats develops a paradox about the power and impotence of poetry. Poetry survives and changes our ways of looking at the world; yet it "makes nothing happen", and the death of a writer looks small in the newspapers compared to

the movements of the stock exchange. "The Journey of the Magi" dramatizes the disheartening difficulties entailed by the attainment of faith among "an alien people clutching their gods"; rapture like that of Milton's Nativity Ode would be out of character in Eliot's aging Wise Man.

3. *Imagery*: The surest and best approach to many a supposedly "difficult" modern poem is through its imagery. A reader who begins by asking "What is the central metaphor (or metaphors) of this poem, and what are its implications?" will probably arrive more quickly at a fuller enjoyment and comprehension of the poem as a whole than will a reader on the lookout only for a story or an explicit general statement of the poem's theme. The importance of imagery today, and the structural weight it often, carries, can readily be demonstrated by a few examples.

Hopkins's sonnet "The Caged Skylark" offers an example of an extended comparison whose meaning is gradually developed as the poem proceeds. The octet states the basic simile clearly: man's spirit imprisoned in his body is like a skylark in a cage:

> As a dare-gale skylark scanted in a dull cage.
> Man's mounting spirit in his bone-house, mean house, dwells—
> That bird beyond the remembering his free fells;
> This in drudgery, day-labouring out life's age;
> Though aloft on turf or perch or poor low stage,
> Both sing sometimes the sweetest, sweetest spells,
> Yet both droop deadly sometimes in their cells
> Or wring their barriers in bursts of fear or rage.

The sestet frees the skylark from the cage altogether:

> Not that the sweet-fowl, song-fowl, needs no rest—
> Why, hear him, hear him babble and drop down to his nest,
> But his own nest, wild nest, no prison.

Logic might expect the poem to conclude with a corresponding picture of man's soul freed (by death) from its body; but Hopkins is now concerned with unlikeness rather than likeness :

> Men's spirit will be flesh-bound when found at best,
> But uncumbered : meadow-down is not distressed
> For a rainbow footing it nor he for his bones risen.

For man at his best, that is, the bodily "cage" is only a seeming prison; he is really "uncumbered", and spiritual vitality is no more incompatible with physical circumstance than the colours of the rainbow are with the earth out of which the bow seems to rise. The "meadow down" of the next-to-last line takes us back to the *uncaged* skylark with which man is finally compared.

T.S. Eliot's "Waste Land", a puzzling poem on the surface, can be readily approached even by a reader wholly ignorant of French, German, Italian, and Sanskrit if it is seen as a study in the analogy between two central images: a modern city and a desert. As in a documentary motion picture, the city-image is presented partly by direct description of such things as the crowd flowing over London Bridge or the cigarette boxes along the Thames; and partly by a series of dramatized glimpses into the lives and thoughts of various inhabitants, ranging from the archduke's cousin of the opening lines to the Thames maidens of Part III, and including along the way the contrasted upper-and lower-class scenes of Part II. The desert image frames the poem by its appearance in the first and last sections; it crops up in such passages as the "Burning burning burning burning" at the end of Part III; and it evokes various contrasting water-images, notably in Part IV. (Similarly, the modern city and its inhabitants also evoke contrasts; these are drawn from the past—from Elizabethan London, for example) Linking the two images of the desert and the city is the figure of the king who, at the end of the poem, sits "Fishing with the arid plain behind me"; the king's voice may be imagined as speaking to us through the mouths of other commentators

(like Tiresias) at various points in the poem. In summary, then, "The Waste Land" might be said to be about a king whose city has become, or is becoming, a desert. The problem of reading the poem is mostly a problem of getting at the implications of the desert metaphor by means of an analysis of the kinds of lives led by the city-dwellers.

Auden's "The Climbers" is a sonnet in which the use of nature to dramatize psychology approaches pure allegory. The method is announced by the phrase "mountains of my fear" in the third line. In trying to penetrate these mountains (and obtain self-knowledge) the speaker stumbles and consoles himself with his own faults that have flowered "on a lower alp". In the sestet, accompanied by his mistress, he scales the mountain with ease, overcoming his fear with the aid of love. But the method turns out to have its drawbacks. Preoccupation with his companion has made him lose sight of his object, and the job of critical self-analysis remains undone. The two climbers

> Returned to shore, the rich interior still
> Unknown. Love gave the power, but took the will.

Again the implications of the extended image are the key to the poem.

Finally, it is well not to try to pin an image down too tightly, or limit it to a single possible meaning. In Eliot's dramatic monologue "Gerontion", for example, the house in which the old man lives is evidently both a literal and a metaphorical edifice. It is first the real house in which the homeless speaker, abandoned, hostile, and suspicious, is living out his old age : but as the poem proceeds it merges into the house of the past, a kind of museum of the old man's memories : a house in which Mr. Silvero walks in the next room ; a house with booby-traps in the form of deceptive passages and corridors. Suddenly the whole bearing of the image shifts, and the house becomes the old man's body. Gerontion fears that even after death, even after he "stiffens in a rented house" he cannot evade Christ the tiger. His vain attempts to rekindle physical

delight in old age are like furnishing the bodily house with "a wilderness of mirrors"; decrepitude (the spider and the weevil) cannot be forestalled. The last metamorphosis of the house is into Gerontion's mind; his musings are finally said to have been

Tenants of the house
Thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season.

Q. What accounts for the distinctive greatness of T.S. Eliot on the modern literary scene? Briefly view the influences on his literary career and the development of his poetic style. What new note did Eliot introduce in his poetry?

Ans. Like all poets, Eliot was a child of his age and with his contemporaries he matured during 'a period of search for a proper modern colloquial idiom'. Poetry, he held, must not stray too far from ordinary everyday language; most poetic revolutions, such as those materialised in Dryden or Wordsworth, signal a return to common speech. Yet the poet's mind must be uncommon in its capacity for 'amalgamating disparate experience'. The ordinary man 'falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the type-writer or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes'. Further, each amalgam of experience is a new emotion which the poet must 'realise' for an audience, or a succession of audiences, no two of which will be entirely alike. He accomplishes his purpose by finding or creating a stable, intrinsically efficacious 'objective correlative': that is, 'a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion: such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked'.

Preceding Eliot was period of poetic creation which is roughly called in England the Edwardian poetry (1890-1925) and to which labels like 'Decadent' or 'Fin de-Siecle' are attached. It was the post-Victorian world, a world of great culture and charm, in many ways more colourful and certainly more relaxed than the grimly serious age presided over by Queen Victoria. But this age hid a core of mounting tension, anxiety and threatened anarchy. The 'ancient' regime of the nineteenth century was slowly tottering to its ruins, symbolised by the terrible and senseless carnage of the First World War (1914-18) after which Europe was a different thing altogether. England was nearly ruined financially and had lost its best young men on the battlefield. France had been bled white. The Austro-Hungarian Emp re, the Turkish Empire, the old Russia and the old Germany were all finished. In Russia, the Bolsheviks had seized power. Everywhere there were new nations such as Poland, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. This was a totally different set-up for artists like Eliot who had been brought up in the pre-war days.

The Great War of 1914-18 confirmed many Americans in their worst fears about Europe : its violence, bloodshed, social evils and decadence. But Eliot chose to stay on in Europe and was deeply involved in the tragic history of the continent from 1914 to 1939. His poetry bears the marks of his age as indelibly as Dante's bore the marks of the Guelph-Ghibelline struggle in medieval Italy. Eliot's greatest poetry was in fact the product of the two world wars and his whole career as a writer is an exploration (at first as an outsider) of the great Catholic European Western culture which was collapsing in ruins throughout his lifetime. Like Henry James, he was constantly occupied by the 'European problem', the problem not only of human relationships across cultures but of the very survival of western cultural values as deposited in the ancient culture of Europe.

At the back of Eliot's poetry from 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' to 'Four Quartets' lies this great battle

of declining western Christianity. Oswald Spengler's 'Der untergang des Abendlandes' (Decline of the West) is permeated by a profound pessimism about Europe and about Christian civilisation. It is all the more poignant in 'The Waste Land', which owes much of its spirit to Spengler's book.

It was Fitzgerald's 'Omar Khayyam' that opened Eliot's ears to a new kind of poetic music, pessimistic and highly coloured, sensuous and melancholy. He then went on to the Romantics, especially Byron, Shelley, Keats, Rossetti and Swinburne. Of these the influence of Byron, Rossetti and Swinburne is most definitely traceable in his own poetry. And like the youthful Yeats, Eliot was, at this time, a thorough decadent romantic of the Swinburnean type.

Eliot's introduction to Donne and his poetry (1906) was not so vital to his development as his reading of critical book two years later, Arthur Symons's 'The Symbolist movement in Literature'. Here Eliot came across the poetry of Jules Laforgue (1806-87), one of the French 'fin-de-siecle' poets. In many ways the young 'Prufrockian' Eliot is Laforguean. Laforgue was a romantic, but his tone was cynical and critical. He introduced sentiment only to jeer and throw stones at it. He used contemporary French seasoned with slang and neologisms. His typical device, which Eliot was to copy, was to split himself into two voices, one sentimental and serious, the other derisive and flippant. Eliot said of him, "He was the first to teach me how to speak..."

Symons's book also introduced Eliot to Charles Baudelaire. Baudelaire, though blasphemous and a violent Satanist, was deeply religiously evil, and rejected humanism and liberalism with scorn. He was nearer to the centre of Christianity than an agnostic or atheist, because his blasphemy was an acknowledgment of the reality of God and the seriousness of religion. Baudelaire's subject-matter and style fascinated Eliot because he wrote of the sordid

aspects of modern city life, fusing fact and fantasy, glory and horror :

> 'Fourmillante cite, cite pleine de reves,
> Ou le spectre en ple in jour raccroche le passant...''

(Ant-like city, city full of dreams, where the ghost at noon confronts the passerby.)

These poets were highly personal and self-revealing. Laforgue had dramatised the romantic self and counterpointed it with his another critical self. This change—from poetry as communication to poetry as art, the depersonalising of poetry—was to be developed further by Eliot in 'The Waste Land' in which the personal voice of the poet is counterpointed by others.

Eliot read and admired Browning, who is in many ways was the perfecter of the form of the dramatic monologue. In 'Andrea del Sarto' and 'The Grammarian's Funeral', Browning speaks for himself but through the voices of invented characters : he hides behind the mask of his soliloquising protagonist. 'The Love-Song of Alfred Prufrock' owes perhaps nearly as much to him as to Laforgue.

We see, therefore, that Eliot's view of art is unromantic. He does not see the poet as communicating feelings or ideas so much as using his feeling or ideas in order to create a new artistic order. Art is, thus, not essentially communication. Eliot's ideas are basically those of the 'Imagists'—Ezra Pound, T.E. Hulme, Hilda Doolittle etc., although he was never a member of their group.

In 1951, Eliot referred to Dante as the 'most persistent and deepest influence' upon his verse. He was in love with Dante's language. Dante, according to Eliot, taught him three things : how to develop and refine the language of his nation ; how to get emotional range ; and how to be European.

Eliot persistently viewed his world in terms of Dante's Inferno and Purgatorio. It was his design as well as ambition to employ contemporary speech in the Dantean way.

Apart from the influences listed above, one must keep in mind that Eliot, like Coleridge, was a poet absorbed in books and 'The Waste Land' contains references, direct or indirect, to a whole library of them. He was widely read in anthropology, sociology, economics, philosophy and religion, and in a great deal of poetry and drama. With the possible exceptions of Ezra Pound and Robert Graves, Eliot was the most erudite of all modern English poets. Eliot's poetry may be considered as falling into two major phases which almost coincide with pre-Christian and Christian stages.

The first phase dates approximately from 1917 to 1922 and the second may be fixed from 1925 to 1950. The first phase gives us 'The Love-Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' in which Eliot's own voice is heard for the first time. The grand climax to this phase is marked by 'The Waste Land', Eliot's greatest poem. A look at the style of 'Prufrock' is enough to convince one of the proximity of Eliot's style to that of a dramatic monologue of Browning. The poem, in spite of some difficulties and complexities, is not at all difficult. There is one person who speaks all the time (Prufrock himself) ; sometimes he talks to himself, at other times to a friend supposedly ('You'), a device employed extensively by Browning. The difficulty regarding the identity and the sex of the friend is a minor one. After reading 'Andrea del Sarto', 'Maud' and 'Dover Beach' one can go on to 'Prufrock' without a great deal of shock. The style of the poem is related to the immediately preceding traditional nineteenth-century poetry to give the reader a sense of confidence. The language is colloquial, simple, with a few very envious literary references (Lazarus, John the Baptist and Hamlet). What startles here is the imagery—a mixture of Laforgue and Metaphysical conceits—and the tone. The tone and feeling are Laforguean, highly pessimistic, cynical and 'decadent'. One of the things that makes

the poem easy to follow is the 'story-line'. Eliot's interest in narrative is proved further by the narrative content of 'The Waste Land'.

Instead of regular stanzaic patterns and metres, Eliot gives us a series of uneven lines. It is a kind of free verse. There are, however, a number of formal conventions : the repetition of key words and key lines like themes or dominant chords in music, *e.g.* :

'In the room the women come and go
Taling of Michael Angelo'.

and 'I have known......' 'I have heard...,' 'after...' etc.

But significant in view of Eliot's subsequent development is his use of deliberate anti-climax or bathos. There are numerous examples of the way in which a highly poetic or rhetorically dignified line is followed by a line of stupendous bathos :

'Time to turn back and descend the stair
With a bald spot in the middle of my hair'.

and the classic :

'I grow old...I grow old
I shall wear the bottom of my trousers rolled'.

This device comes from Laforgue and Ezra Pound and is designed to shock and disturb. To break loose from both staleness and over-writing, Eliot exploits this device of first building up a poetic suggestiveness and then deliberately dissipating the effect with banality or derision. He blows up poetic bubbles and bursts them disconcertingly.

But in the poems that follow 'Prufrock' around 1920, one finds a change in Eliot's technique. Typical of this change is 'Sweeney among the Nightingales'. In this poem the narrative line is unimportant. What is vital to the poem is the depth of the meaning, layer beneath layer.

Instead of having a meaning, the poem has *meanings.* Eliot, the poet, is absent from the poem ; he is not even present as the voice of the poem as in 'Prufrock'. There is a greater degree of impersonality than even the dramatic monologue has. The technique is like that of the film : a series of shots. The narrative links are left out and, as in medieval ballads, the audience is presented with the highlights of the story only.

There is an effect of great vividness accompanied by a blurring effect. The contemporary events of a sordid, rather sinister encounter in a South American 'dive' or brothel, are interwoven with echoes of the heroic literature of Greece, and the Christian scene in a Catholic country :

'The host with someone indistinct
Converses at the door apart,
The nightingales are singing near
The Convent of the Sacred Heart

And sang within the bloody wood
When Agamemmnon cried aloud
And led their liquid siftings fall
To stain the stiff dishonoured shroud'.

In the 1920-poems, Eliot abandons free verse and achieves economy and an ironical musical effect (in contrast to the usually pleasant subject-matter) by using regular metres, especially rhymed octosyllabic four-line stanzas. Regularity of metre gives Eliot an opportunity to present his startling images with ironic and subtle force.

The first phase reaches its climax in 'The Waste Land' in which Eliot's technique attains a degree of sophistication and complexity which it had never reached before. There is a general free verse structure interspersed with patches of regular metrical lines, usually parodies or echoes of other poems. We have again the typical 'Prufrockian' bathos of ribald or facetious imagery introduced to dissipate or satirize

a heroic-romantic illusion, as is done in this treatment of 'Keatsian magic' :

> 'Out of the window perilously spread
> Her drying combinations touched by the sun's last rays !

In place of echoes and parallels found in earlier pieces, we now have a 'college' of direct quotations not only from English but a dozen ancient and modern literatures.

In 'The Waste Land' Eliot introduces a technique he was to use again in the 'Four Quartets'—the 'out-of-focus' meaning. One scene is merged with several others (as in the Stetson eipsode of Part 1), and one character with several others. Modern England becomes ancient Greece, the Dardanelles merges with Mylae, London with Babylon. One has the impression of a palimpsest, or of a film moving in and out of focus but never staying quite still. Finally 'The Waste Land' has through these devices reached a form of impersonality. The poem is still, in its origin, a personal and very romantic statement, but its structure attempts to submerge the poet's personality in total structure.

The second phase began in 1925 with 'The Hollow Men' which looks and probably is, in origin, a piece lopped off from 'The Waste Land' by Ezra Pound, and continued up to 'Four Quartets' (1935-42) which virtually closed Eliot's career as a poet. 'The Hollow Men' returns to the dramatic monologue technique, although it is a choral poem, not a soliloquy. The style is simple, romantic and ritualistic. The fragments from the Bible and the Anglican and Roman Catholic Prayer Books remind us of 'The Waste Land' and look forward to 'Ask Wednesday', which follows the personal romantic trend of 'Prufrock', but this time Eliot speaks for himself, although he uses the language of the Church of England liturgy and the Catholic Missal. (It was written after Eliot's conversion to the Anglican Church.) The tone is uniform and Eliot drops altogether the use of

bathos. There are allusions and references, but these are gentle and naturally introduced, totally unlike the deliberately jerky and savage 'collage' of 'The Waste Land'.

Eliot made no more experiments, at least not in lyrical peotry, until he began on 'Four Quartets' with 'Burnt Norton'. This and the other three poems are constructed in five sections, like variations on a theme in a piece of music (a sonata, for example). Eliot had Beethoven's final Quartets in mind and intended these poems to be a summing-up of his poetic experience. They are beautifully varied in technique, blank verse, free verse, terza rima, and even the sestina is used. Sometimes the poetry drops to a prose level of philosophical statement ; at others it soars to great lyrical and meditative heights, as in 'The dove descending...' passage of 'Little Gidding'.

The shock technique of 'The Waste Land' is altogether abandoned in these musical and rhythmic poems which are reminiscent of Mallarme, Baudelaire and Verlaine. The poetry has reached a serenity and majesty which bring Eliot's lyrical poetry to a fitting close. 'Four Quartets' possesses a complexity and depth which are not traceable so easily in the earlier poems. Yet this great final flight of Eliot's lyric Muse sums up the experience of his whole career as a poet.

Q. Analyse and examine 'The Love-Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' critically.

Ans. The Love-Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' was first Published in June 1917 in the collection, 'Prufrock and other Observations'. The poem portrays boredom and frustration and modern life through Prufrock who, always hesitating of wavering, finds it hard to express his love to his beloved. According to F.O. Matthiessen, "The point of calling this poem a *Love-Song* lies in the irony that it will never be sung ; that Prufrock will never dare to voice what he feels".

Eliot is fond of prefacing his poems with epigraphs taken from other poets. In each case the epigraph is designed to form an integral part of the effect of the poem. In 'The Love-Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' the epigraph comes from Dante's 'Inferno' and states the situation of another character who was called upon to reveal himself. His answer is given in the words of the epigraph.

'If I thought my answer was to one who ever could return to the world, this flame should shake no more ; but since none ever did return alive from this depth, if what I hear be true, without fear of infamy I answer thee".

The first line of the poem introduces a 'You and I' at a point in a debate at which the subjective 'I' is surrendering to one more objective 'You' and agreeing to go somewhere —considerable heat has been generated over the identity of this 'You'. The title suggests a friend, a lady, but, according to George Williamson, the epigraph suggests a scene out of the world, on a submerged level. Is the 'I' giving in to a lady ? Going to a more acceptable rendez-vous ? Or is he submitting for the moment to an urgent 'You'—with whom he is not in harmony ?

It is evening but it has an unusual character; as something seen through the eyes of the speaker, it derives its character from the speaker:

"Like a patient etherised upon a table"...The speaker, submissive if not reluctant, sees the evening in the aspect of etherisation and the metaphor of etherisation suggests the desire for inactivity to the point of enforced release from pain. All this projects the mind of the speaker—a mind in conflict but presumably occupied with love.

After the reader learns the time of going, he learns the way of going as well; and considering the suggested character, it is a surprising way, through a cheap section of the town:

> ".......... through half deserted streets,
> The muttering retreats
> Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
> And sawdust restaurants with oyster shells........"

But it further characterises the argument, tedious but insidious because it leads to an "overwhelming question". The streets suggest the character of the question at their end as well as the nature of the urge which takes this route. The abrupt break after the mention of the question suggests an emotional block which is emphasised by the refusal to identify the question. It implies that while all the time Prufrock is catching hold of the central phrases, he is unable to come to the point where he should ask the 'overwhelming question'. It reveals, to a great extent, the confusion in his own mind. Yet we are given an object of going in "our visit", though the real purpose has been evaded. This closes the first section and is followed by a stanzaic pause.

The most obvious question that "visit" provokes is "where" and that is answered by "in the room" where

> "......the women come and go
> Talking of Michelangelo".

This is a contrast between the sophisticated and artificial world of the salons and whatever reality, or part of reality that we perceive in "half-deserted streets".

After this recall of his destination, Prufrock turns back to the immediate scene—immediate at least in his psychological drama, or interior monologue.

With the image of the fog as cat, we have another reflection of his mental state: desire which ends in inertia. If the cat image suggests sex, it also suggests the greater desire of inactivity. The speaker sees the evening in aspects of somnolence, or of action lapsing into inaction, artificial and natural—sleep and etherisation. The fog's settling down prompts the reflection that "indeed there will be time" for its more suggestive activity and for his own. It may be observed that Eliot also follows Ben Jonson's rule for disposition that each part provides "cue" to the following part. "Time now associates the scene with his mental indecision, but time also offers him an escape. This escape is good, however, only until the crucial moment for the question arrives; tension mounts as the time shortens, reaching a climax when he must "begin".

As he takes comfort in postponement, in the future, he amplifies the contemplated action in its "overwhelming" aspect with a violence of similitude that began with the metaphor of etherisation. This also adds to the growing tension. And this violence of similitude is functional: it expresses emotions or states of mind; its exaggeration often explodes into gentle ridicule, provides the excess by which excessive feeling is perceived and measured.

But there will be time for what? To prepare a face for the ordeal? Or rather "to meet the faces that you meet?" His self-conscious accommodation to the social scene suggests the same thing in others. This action is given an incongruous violence by the phrase "to murder and create"—relative to one face and being and another. The same kind of

mock-heroic contrast appears in the un-Hesiodic "works and days of hands", though it also magnifies the question. And there will be time for the two of them, you and me, at least before the event. This section ends by making precise the moment for the "overwhelming question", which is tea-time.

> And again the place is recalled.
> "In the room the women come and go
> Talking of Michelangelo".

In the poem it becomes almost the haunting refrain that it is the mind of the speaker.

Still finding comfort in time, the next section increases the tension by raising the question of "daring"—only to particularise his fear: "Do I dare ?' and 'Do I dare !' " The tensional image of climbing the stairs, with its implication of effort, only exposes his weakness in the self-conscious disabilities proper to unromantic middle age. Again there is the mock-heroic touch in his "collar mounting firmly" and the "assertion" of his simple pin. His fear has now mounted to the image of daring to "disturb the universe". And so he clings the more desperately to the comfort of time ; in the possibilities of a "minute" he finds the courage to mention 'decision" where before he could only utter "indecisions".

In this projection of a psychological drama Prufrock is coming ever nearer to "the room". Now he recalls the times that he has known, the trivial and the timed—measuring out of his "life with coffee spoons". At this point the imminence of his test is indicated by the emergence of the present tense :

> I *know* the voices dying with a dying fall
> Beneath the music from a farther room".

He is within sound and presently within range of other senses. He has known all this without doing what he now considers :

"So how should I presume" to disturb the accepted order ?

The images progress in intimacy as he approaches the climax : voices, eyes, arms. Now the eyes fix him, give him his place in the accepted order, with "a formulated phrase". When he has been classified like an insect, how can he deny this classification and break from the past ? How can he begin

"To spit out the butt-ends of my days and ways ?"

The violence of the metaphor has an appropriate indecorum for the social scene which intensifies the conflict within him.

As he itemises the arms he has known, he is distracted for a moment by an erotic symbol, the parenthetic observation :

"But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair !"

He seeks the cause of this digression in "perfume from a dress ;" but is it a digression ? And if so, for the "you" or the "I" ? Knowing these arms, he asks,

"And should I then presume ?"

The climax comes with a question that is also an answer. "And how should I begin ?"

And begin he does, but he never finishes his proposal. After the preamble following "Shall I say...", his psychological block sets in and he concludes by observing the kind of creature he should have been :

"I should have been a pair of ragged claws
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas".

Prufrock realises the impossibility of establishing communication with the world and Prufrock, therefore, wants to go back to primitivism. The sea imagery should be kept in mind because the poem ends on the notes of "sea" and "drowning".

After this crisis the somnolent imagery is resumed and decreasing tension is at once marked :

"And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully !" Now the evening sleeps, or malingers, catlike, "here beside you and me"—both of whom, one must conclude, are Prufrock. The rhyme of "ices" with 'crisis" marks their chime by their antithesis, and is characteristic of the way in which Eliot makes his rhyme functional.

A series of heroic parallels, first mentioned in Michel-angelo, is begun in a self justification which thereby becomes mockheroic. Though he has prepared for the trial of strength, Prufrock is no prophet like John the Baptist ; certainly not the hero of Wilde's *Salome* for he is grown "slightly bald". Though he has aspired to such a role, his self-consciousness makes him extremely sensitive to social discomfiture—reflected in the image of his head "brought in upon a platter". The contrast here is between the trivial landscape and the man who is trying to make them understand his message in an unsuccessful manner. Prufrock belongs to this society and he must not abandon it. He has to be reconciled to the society in which he lives. His gestures are the satiric, and not the prophetic, defiance. (Besides, a bald head does not go with prophesies.) His defiance is controlled by the society he lives in.

And so his great moment has passed and the "eternal Footman" of social fate—as inexorable as John's death—has snickered as he held his coat, dismissing him with the shame of inferiority added to defeat. Timidity has conquered his amorous self—the suppressed "you". In excusing himself he has seized on a parallel which both exposes and mocks his weakness.

Henceforth he looks back upon the event and rationalises his failure ;

> "And would it have been worth it, after all,......
> Would it have been worthwhile,......"

And always his fear of misunderstanding the lady and exposing himself to ridicule settles the question. To his frustrated self he explains that "among some talk of you and me" he might have revealed his buried life—here the Lazarus parallel expresses its momentous nature for him—only to expose himself to a rebuff :

> "To say : 'I am Lazarus, come from the dead,
> Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all'—
> If one, settling a pillow by her head,
> Should say, 'That is not what I meant at all.
> That is not it, at all' ".

Then the poem turns again, this time to a note of decision, marking the resumption of his dominant role. He is not Prince Hamlet, though indecision might suggest it ; rather the cautious attendant :

> "No ! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be ;
> Am an attendant lord, one that will do
> To swell a progress, start a scene or two,
> Advise the prince ;.............."

Prufrock's own incapacity to act is similar to that of Hamlet, though he denies it and claims to be different from him.

Here even the sententious, choppy verse suggests the prudent character, as he takes refuge in self-mockery. The long, heavy sounds of weariness are heard in the line "I grow old......I grow old....." while he asserts the unromantic character to which he resigns himself, resolving, however, to be a little sportive in dress (by wearing his trousers cuffed). No more "overwhelming questions" for him ; only whether to try to hide his baldness, or whether he dares to eat a peach. Perhaps all this will be his revolt against middle-aged decorum, but then the mermaids, like the lady, probably will not sing to him (as to Ulysses).

The imagery of the sea, begun with "oyster shells", again emerges at this point, it is the imagery of his

suppressed self and the verse takes on a lyric or singing character where it has been talking verse before. The lyric note comes with the erotic imagery of the mermaids and the hair of the waves recalls the down on the lady's arms. This watery, floating imagery involves the relaxation of all effort, offers a submerged fulfilment. It is ended when human voices wake us, and we drown"—with the intrusion of reality, which drowns the inner life, the "us" in Prufrock. If this is a sublimation of the amorous Prufrock, it is a release of the timed Prufrock from the polite world which overcomes him. But reality returns and the divided self is submerged again, not resolved.

Q. Write a note on the technique used by Eliot in 'The Love-Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.

Ans. Eliot has transposed his epigraph (taken from Dante's 'Inferno') to a modern psychological context through this 'love-song'. Prufrock answers his suppressed self because 'none ever did return alive from this depth'; hence he can answer without fear of being exposed. The reasons for this suppression, however, involve othar fears. The 'you' is the amorous self, the sex instinct, direct and forthright ; but now suppressed by the timid self finding at best evasive expression ; always oppressed by fear of the carnal, motivates the defensive analogies. It is to this buried self that Prufrock addresses himself and excuses himself. His love-song is the song of a being divided between passion and timidity ; it is never sung in the real world. For this poem develops a theme of frustration, of emotional conflict, dramatised by the 'you and I'.

Regarding its technique, we'll have to examine a few of the characteristics of the poem. Evening likened to 'a patient etherised upon a table' is not a logical inference, but an association or an intuition deriving from an emotional state ; it tells us more about the perceiver than about the object of perception. The figure could be developed logically

by observing the similar elements on each side, thus inferring the likeness from these signs. But the reference in Eliot's comparisons is less to the thing compared than to the mood, character or situation with which it is associated.

On the other hand, 'Let us go and make our visit' is followed by a logical inference—that of destination, for visits have destinations. But the inference is presented in the form of an image :

> 'In the room the women come and go
> Talking of Michelangelo'.

And this image carries both the inference and a description—a description of place, by Eliot's favourite method of showing something happening there. But it also insinuates the mood of the speaker : at his destination they talk of Michelangelo ; it is the first of his heroic juxtapositions.

Other things follow logically enough from this perceiver, his visit, and the room ; but many connections in the poem are associative relations, not logical relations, and one established by the feeling in which the association of images is an important factor. To put this method in another way it is psychological reference rather than grammatical. What is lost in the mind (at least, previously) connects with what follows ; in looking for the link we sometimes overlook the obvious. Violent breaks are violent only in the immediate context, not in the context of the poem, always the antecedent part. Incongruous elements are explained by the larger context of the poem. In this regard one should not accept any explanation that conflicts with part of the context or with the whole poem. The explanation of violent or exaggerated phrasing must be sought in the character or feeling represented, not in the poet.

In general, metaphor and symbol replace direct statement in Eliot. In 'Prufrock' we have what comes to be a familiar compound, observation, memory, and reflection, in

which observation becomes symbol. The doctrine of the objective correlative means not only that the subjective is projected into the objective, or by means of it, but that it is expressed in other terms—metaphor ; objects become symbols, and personal feeling is set apart from the poet. Connection through imagery is characteristic of Eliot who is likely to exploit a kind of imagery, not to use it at random. A particular kind of imagery becomes the expression of a particular kind of feeling, not only in the same poem but in different poems. Recurrent imagery may not only reiterate a theme, provide a base for variations, or development ; its recurrence usually is accompanied by a deeper plumbing or a richer exploration of its significance. For some of these uses one may witness in 'Prufrock' the sea imagery, hair imagery, sartorial imagery, that of polite versus crude society, that of bare sensitivity versus the protective shell, images of relaxation or concentration of effort or will and finally the heroic parallels which both magnify and mock the overwhelming question.

Such a method of indirection is appropriate to a character who never really faces his inner conflict or his frustrated self, and hence is incapable of a direct expression of it, to say nothing of a solution. Here the most revealing lines in the poem are

> 'Is it prefume from a dress
> That makes me so digress ?'

But the observation 'downed with light brown hair' is no digression from the arms or from Prufrock's problem. This is why the epigraph, with its conditioned response, provides an important clue to the intention of the poem ; and the title shifts its context significantly. The title suggests the question for this song of indirection, made such by repression. The mock-heroic tone is not merely in the author's treatment or in his character's conception of the problem, but finally even in Prufrock's evasion of himself.

Such a use of imagery is more than usually dependent upon arrangement. But the order of parts will reveal an

implicit method in an Eliot poem that is essential to its meaning. There is such a method in 'Prufrock' ; it is begun by 'Let us go' and ended with 'and we drown'. The going is developed and dramatised even by verb tenses, the time element. The 'drown' submerges again what has emerged in the 'going'—which is never directly said—and concludes the imagery of his submerged life. To this arrangement the author helps the reader in many ways. His punctuation, for example, is functional not conventional. Verse, too, is a kind of punctuation, as Eliot has remarked, and he comes to rely upon it more and more in this capacity.

Q. Examine how Eliot in 'The Love-Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' gives the impression of a 'a trivial, sordid and empty world'.

Ans. 'The Love-Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' begins with a highly selective piece of scene setting in which is established the character and incidentally of Prufrock. It is apparent from an analysis of the poem that T.S. Eliot is acutely aware of the plight of the modern civilisation. The hollowness and boredom have produced in him an attitude of disgust. He creates the moods of ironic and cynical repulsion, of unromantic disillusionment and of nervous intensi y which mirror his predicament. He has transmuted its welter of triviality and horror into a wealth of related symbolic details.

> 'Let us go then, you and I,
> When the evening is spread out against the Sky—
> Like a patient etherised upon a table—'

This is a metaphysical concept that sets the tone of the poem immediately. The comparison of the evening to patient etherised upon a table establishes the tone and setting of the poem. Prufrock and the evening are identical —the two are peaceful, with a suggestion of unhealthiness

and absence of vitality. It may be noticed here that the outward scene does not exist for its own sake ; it forms a set of symbols which correspond to emotional realities.

And the next image is equally significant—they reinforce the impression of disease and helplessness :

'Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels......
Streets that follow like a tedious argument
Of insidious intent
To lead you to an overwhelming question......'

The phrase 'one-night cheap hotels' suggest the homelessness of the human soul. There is also something common between Prufrock and the 'streets that follow like a tedious argument'. Each is unstable, shifting. The streets will lead nowhere ; and similarly the reflections of Prufrock are tortuous and without end.

This is followed by the description of the fog in terms of the movement of a cat : 'the yellow fog that rubs its back upon the widow panes' is a significant detail. These details are symbolic; they correspond to certain emotional realities, 'the voices dying with a dying fall', 'the eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase' and other such details help to complete the picture of Prufrock. This imagery, drawn from the contemporary world, is not merely decorative ; it is an integral part of the poem and helps Eliot to present the peculiar situation in which Prufrock finds himself.

Having thus established the kinship of Prufrock with the scene of the evening, Eliot goes on to dramatise the 'tragical comical' situation of the man. Prufrock is the picture of a man who is too fastidious to trust his instincts, who hesitates but is no great tragic figure like Hamlet (merely an attendant lord or so, at whom the eternal Footman sinckers) and who does not risk the emotional upheaval of love. He is undecided and vaguely troubled.

'And indeed there will be time ....
Time for you and time for me,
And time yet for a hundred indecisions,
And for a hundred visions and revisions,
Before the taking of a toast and tea''.

Here by the use of the trivial for a serious purpose, Eliot throws into relief the character of the man. The juxtaposition of the great visions and decisions with the immediate business of the moment 'toast and tea' is a fine ironic comment on the whole situation. Eliot juxtaposes the passionate and the trivial, the grand and the low; in this way he can state and judge a situation at the same time. The advantage of this method is a dramatic compression. The 'overwhelming question' which Prufrock dare not ask becomes ridiculous in the context of 'the cups, the marmalade, the tea, and some of you and me'. To declare his love appears to Prufrock as something that 'might disturb the universe'.

'Do I dare
Disturb the universe ?
In a minute there is time
For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse'.

Prufrock, there, unable to take a decision and execute it with firmness, withdraws into the world of despairing introspective day-dream. His mingled self-pity and self disgust are brought home to us through the images of tortuous streets and the fag-cat, the pictures of his life as measured out with coffee spoons, and the symbols of his terror of social and sexual failure. Prufrock, not fitted for the role of a great tragic hero ('no! I am not prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;'), is caught in trivial social routine ('I have coffee spoons'). Being incapable to any higher experience, he wishes to escape into the world of animal existence, to primitivism :

'I should have been a pair of ragged claws
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas'.

He knows and itemises the eyes and the arms 'braceleted and white and bare', arms that 'lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl' of the woman to whom he would say something of love : but how should he begin ?

> 'Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets
> And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes
> Of lonely men in shirt sleeves, leaning out of windows ?'

Self-pity here is unmistakable. But this kind of appeal to the lady will not do. The 'overwhelming question' is never precisely formulated and uttered.

Prufrock never reaches a decision. He thinks that the 'overwhelming question' might release unforeseen consequences and, by its importance disturb the universe. But the next two lines tell us that there is nothing very important. Prufrock is so different and wavering that his decisions can be reversed in a minute. 'It is impossible to say that just what I mean'.

Finally, the shrunk world of Prufrock is set beside a series of suggestions which take us to a world of spontaneous action :

> 'I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.
> I do not think that will sing to me,
> I have seen them riding seaward on the waves,
> Combing the white hair of the waves blown back
> When the wind blows the water white and black'.

This remarkable picture stands in sharp contrast to the inert Prufrock. Here are the mermaids and living creatures delighting spontaneously, without inhibition in their natural environment sharing its vital energies. And this is something that Prufrock is simply not destined to get.

Eliot has thus conveyed to us the effect of a 'trivial, sordid and empty world' in the fewest lines possible. In the words of an eminent critic Eliot 'confesses he selects, he intimates, and thus he creates an atmosphere, records a mood in verse so charged in elliptical associations as to be a kind of musical shorthand'.

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